

Funds protect battle site important to Vt.

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By [Louis Porter](#) Vermont Press Bureau

Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., has come to the aid of a monument to one of the bloodiest and most famous moments in Vermont's Civil War history.

The stone marking the place where Vermonters fought at the Battle of Cedar Creek now sits on private land on a Virginia hilltop and that could be at risk of development.

A \$2 million provision in the federal highway bill worked on by the Vermont Independent and recently signed into law would allow the National Park Service to buy property around the battle site.

This will ensure public access and protection of the monument, erected where a group of Vermont soldiers suffered enormous casualties and helped turn a Union defeat into victory.

In the summer and fall of 1864, Northern troops were cutting through Virginia's fertile Shenandoah Valley, the "breadbasket of the confederacy," burning mills and fields and reducing an important source of supplies for the southerners.

By Oct. 19, the Union troops, convinced they had broken the might of the Confederates in the valley, were camped along the shores of Cedar Creek, about 80 miles west of Washington, D.C. They were ill-prepared for the predawn attack of the reinforced Confederate troops, and it appeared the morning would become a disaster for the Union soldiers.

That was when a handful of Vermonters were sent against the Confederates in an attempt to slow their attack. The small band took their stand on top of a hill that was bare of cover and endured some of the most fierce fighting of the whole war as they gave the soldiers behind them time to prepare for the assault.

"I knew it was sending you into the jaws of death, and I never expected to see you again," the commander who gave the order later told a survivor of the fight.

When the monument was erected 21 years after the battle, one of the veterans of the engagement described the armies fighting "with a fury seldom equaled, and never surpassed."

Herbert Hill, a Vermonters who fought in the engagement and donated the monument of Vermont marble called it "one of the most savage and bloody fights of the great Civil War."

The Vermonters were also involved in crucial fighting later on a nearby ridgeline that is now a cemetery and therefore more protected from development.

Close to 70 percent of the Vermont troops were wounded, killed or captured. It was one of the highest casualty rates among the Union troops during the Civil War, said Howard Coffin, a historian and author of the book "Full Duty: Vermonters in the Civil War."

But the Vermonters and other Union soldiers succeeded in turning the tide of the



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This painting depicting the Battle of Cedar Creek in Virginia hangs in the Statehouse in Montpelier.

Photo: FILE / TIMES ARGUS

battle.

"It's a great moment for Vermont in the Civil War," Coffin said.

And the importance of the battle, with President Abraham Lincoln's re-election vote weeks away, went beyond military strategy.

"This ensured that Lincoln will be sent back for a second term to pursue the war to a final conclusion," said Coffin, a former Jeffords staffer.

Indeed, the Cedar Creek battle was so important to the Vermonters who fought in the Civil War, it was chosen as the subject for the large painting that stands as their memorial in the Statehouse in Montpelier.

"That's how proud they were of it," Coffin said.

Jeffords, ranking member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, worked to get the \$2 million into the federal highway bill to preserve the battlefield. It is something he has been interested in for several years, according to Coffin and staff members of Jeffords, who has announced he will not run for re-election.

"Right along he has been very involved with the battlefield preservation effort," said Tom Berry, natural resource coordinator for Jeffords and one of the staff members who worked on getting the funding for the Cedar Creek site.

"Jeffords has been the most important person in Congress for protecting battlefield land," Coffin said.

For instance, last year Jeffords included \$200,000 in the transportation appropriations bill to improve access to the Wilderness Battlefield in Fredericksburg, Va., another of the battles where Vermonters played a key role, Berry said.

The money, which will go to the Cedar Creek site, is not part of a \$1 billion chunk of funds in the new transportation spending plan dedicated to roads in Vermont, and will not have to be matched with state money, according to Jeffords' staff.

Under the language creating the Cedar Creek and Belle Grove National Historical Park in Virginia in 2002, the National Park Service cannot take property by eminent domain. So landowners must be willing to sell or donate property if it is to be preserved.

The boundaries of the park include 3,000 acres, about 1,000 of which are owned by the federal government or private nonprofit groups that are partners in the creation of the park.

The Belle Grove mansion, near where the Vermont troops camped before the Battle of Cedar Creek, for instance, is owned by the National Trust for Historic Places, one of the partners, said Park Superintendent Diann Jacox.

A study of the Shenandoah Valley battlefields, also supported by Jeffords, was undertaken a few years ago, to see which should be preserved as a park, Jacox said.

"Cedar Creek had retained the most historical integrity among all of the battlefields," she said.

But as housing in the Washington, D.C., area becomes increasingly expensive, development is pushing into previously rural areas, she said.

Although the current landowners near the site of the Vermonters' stand have

preserved and maintained the monument — which is literally in the backyard of at least one home — there is nothing to prevent its removal if the land were to be developed, Jacox said.

"There is a real concern about land preservation," she said. "The farm land is very rapidly being gobbled up here."

To get to the Vermont monument, visitors have to cross private property and make arrangements with the landowners.

"There is no guarantee that in the future the monument will be owned by someone who will allow public access," Jacox said.

If an agreement with landowners is reached, the \$2 million in the federal highway spending plan passed this summer is slated to pay for public access, parking and preservation of views from the hilltop.

"The monument is completely surrounded by private property," Berry said.

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